

# The Challenge of Parent Engagement in Urban Small Schools Reform

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## Abstract

*In the growing trend toward urban school reform vital educational stakeholders often function at cross-purposes in determining the mode and trajectory of change. This tug-of-war is even more poignant in cities with racially charged public school histories, and where reform movements serve to bolster hopes for the rescue of ailing economies. Using an ecological framework for analyzing parent engagement in a small schools reform project, the author suggests that even when parent groups understand, work through, and within institutional power hierarchies, there remain fundamental “disconnects” between parents and schools that continue to stymie efforts toward full participation in school reform.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the growing trend toward urban school reform, especially within struggling urban contexts, vital educational stakeholders such as school boards, unions, parents, university and business interests often function at cross-purposes in determining the mode and trajectory of change. This tug-of-war is even more poignant in cities with racially charged public school histories, and where reform movements serve to bolster hopes for the rescue of ailing economies. In cases such as these, various constituents converge to fight for and claim credit for public school improvement. The literature on parent involvement in urban school reform is very clear on how vital parent voice is to the implementation of meaningful school reform initiatives (Ayers, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Fine, 1994; Finn, Johnson & Finn, 2005). However, more than simply emphasizing this truth, this paper explores the rift in public education left open by missed opportunities to harness parents in the battle for urban school improvement by highlighting the experiences of parents, as they navigate through what Fine (1994) and other scholars have long described as the unequal terrain of power relations between urban educational institutions and urban parents<sup>5</sup>. Through participation in parent activist projects in an urban school district in the Northeast, this paper explores the efforts of one activist parent organization as they attempt to advocate for small school reform within the contested space of a larger urban school reform movement. In making sense of these experiences I draw from an ecological framework for parent engagement conceptualized by Angela Calabrese Barton, et. al. (2004) in which cultural-historical activity theory and critical race theory converge to situate the work of parents in schools. Such a framework allows us to see “what individuals (i.e. parents) know and do, and how that knowing and doing is mediated by the community in which that doing takes place” (p.4). Further, situating these understandings within a context where sets of power relations also play out, illustrates that when “individuals are not positioned equally within networks of activity [they] do not derive the same kinds of benefits from their mediating environments” (p.4).

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Exploring the experiences of parents, who have prior relationships within the district, and are therefore already “located” within a set of relations, allows us to interpret what parents “know” within a context in which what is “known” about them very much mediates outcomes. Using this framework, I argue that even when parent groups understand and attempt to work through and within the power hierarchies that mark educational institutions, there are fundamental “disconnects” between parents and schools that continue to stymie efforts toward full participation in school reform.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Proponents of urban school reform often call for parent participation as a clear departure from school-as-usual formulas in which parents are unwelcome, or viewed as an unwieldy community element to be “managed” rather than embraced. Aside from the rhetoric of NCLB and its supposed accountability to parents (Paige, 2004), reformulated schools are offered up as the only contexts in which teachers, administrators, and schools become truly accountable to parents for the outcomes they assure. In a recent congressional hearing on parent engagement and the reauthorization of NCLB, Wendy Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network, a national coalition of 80 local education funding networks (LEFs), indicated that parent engagement provisions of NCLB have been left under-funded and that parents, therefore, have been shut out of conversations that could lead to a “shared focus” on the goals of school reform agendas such as NCLB (CQ Congressional Testimony, 2007).

So when parents are truly “engaged,” what does it look like? A good example of parents and schools working together for school improvement comes from national efforts for small schools reform. When successful, these relationships are often characterized not only as “parent friendly,” but ones in which parents are key players in major decisions around curriculum, budget, and mission. About these alliances, William Ayers (2000) writes, “Parents are not annoying outsiders to be tolerated, nor phony “partners” in a patronizing nod toward fairness. In small schools parents must be gift and asset, and often decision-makers regarding broad policy and direction” (p.5). After all, the literature is rich with models on the linkages between parent engagement and student success (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1995); however at least one study of the linkages between such engagement and student achievement has noted that there must be a “fit” between the mode of involvement and the school’s expectations for that involvement, otherwise the child cannot function in the separate realms of the home and school in a way that mediates the parent-school relationship successfully (Hoover-Dempsey & Sander, 1995).

This is, in fact, where the tension lies between potential and practice, ideal and reality. Sudia Paloma McCaleb (1997) has indicated, for example, that several basic and hidden assumptions undergird so-called “model programs” seeking parent engagement. Most importantly these include the assumption that there is something wrong or lacking in the family environment, and that emulating school learning at home, what is termed the “transmission school practices model,” is the only way to ensure parents and school are acting in accordance with one another where children are concerned. Recent research has suggested that the literature on parent involvement not only lacks consistency around common understandings of what we mean by “parent involvement,” but that this lack of consistency pervades research and programs designed to engage parents. Angela Calabrese Barton et. al. (2004) suggests that this confusion makes it

impossible to separate "'what" parents were supposed to engage in [from] "how" parents managed to create or accept opportunities for involvement" (p.3). In other words, there exists a gap in the story of parent involvement in which understanding the process of their presence (or absence) is vital to understanding how successful engagement occurs, or is squandered. Barton et. al's (2004) "ecological" framework for parental engagement, one that explores "what it means to understand parental participation as a distributed, dynamic, and interactive process" (4), is used to analyze the small victories and lost opportunities for parent activism in the current context. Barton (2004) writes that "parent engagement is more than an object or an outcome" but more so "a set of relationships and actions" that occur within a context and make sense in various ways to individual stakeholders. It is, therefore, only within the bounds of that context that "engagement" occurs and can therefore be understood (p.11).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The paper is based upon the writer's participation in, and observations of, parent organizing efforts for small schools reform over the course of two years, in a Northeastern rust-belt city. Through the lens of this case study, a story of individuals, circumstances and events emerge to explain the trajectory of engagement for a parent group during a "snapshot" of one urban school reform initiative. Anecdotes of parent activist efforts are used to illustrate "how parents activate nontraditional resources and leverage relationships with teachers, other parents, and community members in order to author a place of their own in schools" (Barton, et. al, 2004, 11). Through notes and reflections of parent meetings, various local events and my own related work at the local university, I elucidate three themes which include 1) parents negotiating voice and space within a set of larger reform efforts, 2) the disconnect between the practice of parent activism and institutional expectations for parent engagement, and 3) the ways racial politics provided opportunity for, and entry into the decision-making realm.

### **Context**

The school district in which these parent efforts took place is located within a Northeastern "rust belt" city, with a markedly declining student population. From 1990 to 2005 the student population dropped twenty-two percent, leaving total enrollment in 2006 at a record low of 36,500. In the past seven years, many schools have been closed or reorganized in an attempt to compensate for these declining numbers and to attend to crumbling infrastructures. The process of school closings and reorganization awakened a small movement of parents, community members, and university faculty to the need to be closer to the decision making processes behind these changes. Initially this unrest led to a call for "choice," or the suggested power of parents to "vote with their feet" and choose to abandon failing schools. School choice opened the door for district-sanctioned charter schools. With nearly sixty percent of the region's charter schools operating in the city, enrollment figures for the district's schools have suffered greatly and this has led to the largest reported fiscal drain on the city's school budget of the entire state – almost eight percent of the budget redistributed to charter schools in 2004-2005.

In 2003, a local group of parents, community activists, and university faculty who had been working together for approximately ten years on a range of parent advocacy projects began to meet about their concerns for the health of the schools and students "left" in the district, as a result of the charter schools movement. Looking for an alternative that would restore the quality of public schools, without sacrificing precious funds or the few remaining students/parents

committed to public schooling, they explored small school models from New York City, Chicago, and Boston. Although small schools vary in form, they share common features including an overarching theme that guides curriculum development, low enrollment, a commitment to student engagement, and collaborative management which values parents as interested stakeholders and decision makers (Ayers, 2000; Siegel, et. al., 2005; Supovitz & Christman, 2005; Vander Ark, 2002; Wasley et al., 2000). These schools were founded with a particular focus on empowering teachers to make the decisions that are in the best interests of the children and the community they serve (Jendryka, 1994; Meier, 1995) and are seen by many policy-makers, private foundations, parents, and teachers as a solution for the problems facing failing urban school districts (Ayers & Klonksy, 2006; Siegel, et. al., 2005). The group was aware that in 2003, the New York City Department of Education announced a \$51 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to develop 67 new small public high schools (press release, 2003), however the parents reported not knowing much about small schools and wanting to learn more. After becoming familiar with pilot projects in other states, they decided a first step would be to inform parents, the district, and community stakeholders of the possibility embodied in reformulated small schools. Important to them was the fact that small schools, or “smaller learning communities” as they are now termed by the U.S. Department of Education (high schools only), are often independent of district mandates, while still maintaining their status as “public district schools.” Although local charter school advocates made the case for charter schools as “public,” these parents felt that small schools were a more viable option, in that they had none of the funding issues that charter school critics tend to decry.

### **Negotiating Space and Voice**

One major challenge to engaging the community in dialogue around small schools reform was that few in the larger community knew about small schools. Understanding the traditional positioning of parents as tertiary to school change efforts, the group knew it was vitally important to position the message from within a group of educational stakeholders already considered legitimate. Barton, et. al. (2004) discuss the importance of negotiating *space* and activating *capital* as essential to full engagement for parents. As “active” participants in their children’s school lives, these parents had carved out space within the district and were already considered “participants” in the schools. However engagement in school change efforts was clearly new territory, and they realized they had few “capital” resources to harness. Therefore, initial community conversations were organized with the aide of a few professors from the university, also noted community activists (Johnson, Carter, Finn & Ansari, 2007). About forty community members attended this workshop, in which a national small schools development advocacy group provided models and strategies for reform, while encouraging conversation about the challenges and opportunities that might exist for small schools locally. However, at the end of that school year, a key university partner retired and the link between the efforts of the group and the university was temporarily broken. A graduate student at the time, and a member of the group, I helped to maintain the group’s connection to the university, and facilitate collaboration with the university around the issue of small schools for the next year.

During the 2003-2004 school year, in conjunction with assistance from me and a few university faculty partners, the parent group was able to cultivate vital networks of interested constituents from the school board, the district superintendent's office, the university, and the

district's university-based educational consulting group. These players were vital in bringing conversations to the highest levels of decision making in the struggling district.

After some initial in-servicing conducted by the author for key players, including district leadership and university faculty, a process which was neither immediate nor effortless, the university and district consultant agreed to begin meeting about the possibility of convening several community meetings to gauge interest in small schools. The perspective of both district and university partners was that school administrators, not parents/community, were the most vital participants for these encounters. They did, however, ask for the official sponsorship of the meetings from the parent group, in order to demonstrate that they were not acting on their own. At that point the parent group was seen as a vetted ally, with valuable links to community. It had, in fact, secured a respectably-sized grant for their work with parents, and was able to direct some of that funding toward the small school's effort.

Interestingly, the university did not see a particular role for itself at that time, other than providing a venue for the meetings. Although it maintains the largest school of education in the region, my work as a university insider revealed that administrators and many education faculty believed they had little influence over school change efforts in the district. This perception had partly to do with the fact that the university was located in the suburbs and did not maintain a strong base of city schools as student-teaching cooperating sites. And aside from the efforts of individual faculty in city schools, the university had little explicit commitment to urban education issues. This was, in fact, a good time for the parent group to mobilize for change. With apparently little interest in the issue, the university could help them harness the capital and resources they needed to reach out to the larger community.

However, once the university administration and the district were in agreement that such an initiative would be mutually beneficial, they saw *their* next challenge as that of engaging the larger community, and particularly parents, around the nebulous concepts of "reform." From the perspective of the parent group, however, they had already been left behind. Parent organizers expressed indignation that their work around identifying small schools as a possible vehicle for school reform had been co-opted by groups with already powerfully entrenched interests – the university, the school board, and private consultants. The parents and their activist partners gathered again in meetings and expressed their apprehensions that they had perhaps made a tactical mistake in courting these very powerful interests, as their own interests were quickly being annexed. The very meaning of "school reform" was being re-interpreted. In meetings with the university and school district leadership, the discourse had shifted into a strategy to use small schools reform as a life vest for ailing schools, with little interest as to whether the new schools were small charter schools or small district schools. The distinction between charter schools and district schools had been lost. There was support on the school board for small schools as well. However, leaders of the board had made it known to members of the parent group that some hoped small schools would serve to temper the power that the teacher's and administrator's union had in the district. From the board's perspective, school change was stymied because the unions refused to provide variances to contracts that would allow, for example, a building principal to hire whomever they wanted to teach in their school. Parents began to wonder how and where their interest would re-emerge.

## The Parent Participation Disconnect

When the university was poised to include parents in what it now saw as *its* small schools initiative, administrators expressed discomfort with the approach of the parent organization and the rouge reputation they believed it maintained in the community. Traditionally a parent advocacy group, the organizing model to which they ascribed they termed "direct parent involvement." Direct parent involvement is based on a model in which parents help other parents to create individual action plans to address parent complaints that are sensitive to cultural contexts, yet are intervention oriented and may have the goal of influencing policies. Parents had already faced challenges to formal participation in the schools with the advent of School Based Management Teams (SBMTs), a New York State law by the mid 1990's (Regulations of the Commissioner of Education, 2006), and a recommendation by The Council of Great City Schools a few years prior to these efforts (Johnson, Carter, Finn & Ansari, 2007). Parents faced significant resistance to the creation and realization of SBMTs. In one case, for example, a parent was blocked out of any opportunities to communicate with teachers at his child's school by the principal who did not support the SBMT concept. Parents came to realize that the idea of "direct parent involvement" was threatening within the context of school closing and reorganization, and that they were not welcome as partners. They articulated the district's idea of parent engagement as having open, but one-way communication in which parents were *informed* of the changes that would affect their children, at a time Michelle Fine (1993) would consider "too late" for dialogue or even contribution (Fine, 1993).

Any victories parents experienced were hard won, individualized cases. One example of this phenomenon was the case in which one parent wanted her child with special needs to be able attend classes at a local college while still receiving federally mandated education services (through the age of 21). This effort was a long and individualized battle, in which one parent had to learn her child's rights, and then negotiate with union leaders and district in a way that benefited her child. Although not originally their intention, such efforts tended to politicize parent engagement as a necessary means of advocating for their children's individual interests and before the small schools initiative, they had worked to guide one another through these kinds of cases. Michelle Fine (1993) has noted the tension that exists between what is framed as the "public" sphere of schools and the "private" sphere of parent interests. Relegated to the "private" sphere, parent's interests are easily marginalized.

If parents' interests are shaped as private, and schools' interests as "public," then a conversation toward a common vision is nearly impossible. Parents (as well as teachers) cannot simply be added to the mix of decision making unless the structures and practices of bureaucracy--school-based and central district--are radically decentralized and democratic (Fine, 1993, *The Philadelphia Story*, p. 19).

However the small schools effort presented a new problem for all parties. Although it was clearly about the needs of children, it wasn't about any particular child's needs. As it was considered of "public" concern, for the common good, any efforts in this direction on the part of the parent group were seen as "political" and clearly not appropriate for parent participation. The schism between what the district considered to be their own "territory" and the interest and intervention of parents allowed the parents to be framed as rouges, and clearly out of their field of expertise.

## **Racial Politics in Parent Engagement**

Understanding the highly political nature of the change process, the parent group harnessed more traditional civil rights approaches to getting their concerns about being “cut out” of the small schools conversation heard and met. As a school district in a historically racially segregated region, parents represent a largely African American student body. About sixty percent of the student body is African American while only about twenty five percent are White. The parent group itself was a balanced mix of African American, white, Hispanic and Native American. Nevertheless, most school administrators, district personnel and school board members at the time were white. Parents in the group noticed that the district often ignored their concerns until they became frustrated enough to vent their anger. Individual parents had experienced results in the past when perceived by school leaders as an “angry black parent.” In discussions within the group, parents realized that by harnessing this stereotype they could leverage the white privilege of white parents in the group when advocating for the needs of parents of color. They consciously used this “one-two punch” approach to parent engagement when visiting schools to speak with administrators and teachers about “problems” their children were experiencing. These meetings had traditionally been rather intimidating for parents, who were usually the only “non-educators” in the room. Parents reported that administrators and teachers would talk at them, tell them what was wrong and what needed to be “fixed,” and parents had few choices but to acquiesce. In the “one-two” model, parents would come in pairs, if possible one parent-of-color and one white parent. School personnel were less likely to use educational-talk without clarifying what they meant. And the two parents would ensure that the school demonstrated some accountability for the problem, rather than laying full responsibility on the parent. In this way, racial politics created immense potential for getting their concerns heard. This understanding of racial politics worked to their advantage during the initial stages of the small schools efforts. One of the white parents, lived on the same block as one of the white school board members, and even belonged to some of the same social groups. That parent used her racial and class privilege to get the group access to meetings and spaces into which most parents of color were not welcome, and subsequently allowed them to position themselves and deliver their message about small schools as a collective voice. However, once concrete plans for introducing district principals to the concept, and the opportunity for “failing” schools to reorganize as a small school was offered, parents were simply not needed anymore. As a side note, the author’s position at the university was also “excessed” so that any efforts to engage in discussions with either the university or the district would have to be from the “outside.” The parent and university activist groups did feel some pride in having steered the district and the university toward a source for training and technical assistance (another national small schools development organization), and that by the fall of 2004 the initiative was officially off the ground, albeit without any outside parent support. Also that fall, a teaching post was created to administer one “smaller learning community” that was a result of the school’s status as a recipient of a federal SLC grant. By that time, however, efforts by the group had been abandoned. With the district and university acting on their own, the parent group could no longer clearly define their role in small schools efforts. Additionally, many of the children of the original group of parents were “aging out” of the system and prior reasons for coalescing were becoming scarce.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Using an ecological approach to parent engagement (Barton, et. al (2004), the experiences of one parent organization as they mobilized for small school reform exposes some of the nuances of what happens to parent “participation” within urban school reform agendas. Although these parents had cultivated a long history within the district as advocates for their children, and “participants” in the schools, the differentially distributed power around school change efforts allowed parents to be re-hewn as agitators – the poison arrow of parent-district relationships, and be pushed outside of spaces where important conversations would ultimately lead to using small schools as a means toward school reform. Although advocating for children is considered an acceptable form of parent involvement legitimated as “the private sphere” of parent interests (Fine, 1993), when parents become interested in a more generalized agenda, having to do with no particular child, their infringement on “public” space becomes apparent and unacceptable. So too, within the highly politicized context of massive school closings and charter schools on the horizon, the parent organization’s model of “direct parent involvement” was likely a threat to a more pressing agenda to turn-around an ailing district, and stem the growing exodus of parents to private and suburban schools. An ecological framework that honors critical race theory (Barton, et. al., 2004) helps push the interpretation further - that as interest in this initiative grew, it was vital that the district and the university be seen as the agents of change, rather than a small group of “rogue” parents-of-color. Additionally, parents understood the racial politics at work in a district where the majority of students are not white, and they were successful in using racial privilege/stereotyping as leverage when working with individual administrators in the service of their children. But as a means to get “in the door” to where important conversations were taking place throughout the change process, racial politics proved an ineffective strategy.

Although, this is clearly a tale about power and the struggle for true partnership, the journey of this one group and its attempts to fully engage in school change are a vital piece in the story of what parents can and are doing for their children and for public education. As school districts across the county increasingly embrace small schools agendas, there are many research questions to be explored including how teachers are being prepared to facilitate relationships with parents in small schools (Keiler & Carter, 2007). Educators and researchers have a responsibility to both engage as active participants and collaborators with parents in their struggle to be heard. If anything, what is underemphasized in this article is the role that individual community members and university faculty members play in shoring up the work of these parents, and the varied ways this work is being conceptualized both with and for parents, and around issues of social justice (Finn, Johnson, & Finn, 2006).

As parents harness increased understandings of the ways that power dynamics and racial politics can and do get played out in the public arena, I believe that communities can more easily determine the form and trajectory of parent activism. The challenges that arise as parents attempt to interpret, intervene, and ultimately re-define the roles traditionally allocated to them particularly amidst larger school reform agendas should also be illustrative to policy makers as they attempt to include parents in urban reform efforts.



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